To Be a Christian
September 18, 2011

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 145:1–9
Matthew 16:13–26

"If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."
Matthew 16:24 (NRSV)

The more we learn about Jesus—and through Jesus about God—the less inclined we are to set *any* limits on divine love.

William C. Placher
Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Open our minds and our hearts to your word, that hearing we might believe, and believing trust you and serve you and our neighbors every day of our lives. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

To be a Christian. How? What exactly does it look like? What do you have to sign, and where do you have to go? If being a Christian were a crime, someone asked, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Furthermore, what would that evidence be?

Greg Garrett, a novelist, professor of English at Baylor University and a lay preacher in the Episcopal church, remembers welcoming Maya Angelou to Baylor for a lecture. She is a writer, poet, civil rights activist, actress, singer, lecturer, and a person of faith with an unforgettable physical presence and a glorious voice.

Garrett invited her to teach one of his English classes, which she did, and he remembers after the class trying to thank her. He became a little condescending and said, "And to think, you're a Christian." He remembers, "She had taken my hand. She still had it as she looked at me—a gentle smile

broke across her face, and she shook her head. . . . ‘Oh, honey,’ she said in that deep rich resonant voice, ‘I’m not a Christian. I’m trying to be a Christian’” (pp.11–12*, The Other Jesus*).

That incident is near the beginning of a new book Garrett has written, *The Other Jesus*. It is one of several new books published recently on the subject of Jesus and what it means to be a Christian. You’d think by now that everything that could be said about the subject would already have been said. But the books, the themes, the ideas keep coming.

To be a Christian begins with Jesus, who he was and is, what he intended, what he taught, and what he wants. The late Joseph Sittler, professor of theology at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, was one of the leading Christian scholars of his day. In an address once, he was reflecting on how Christianity is transmitted from generation to generation and reflected on his own personal experience. He said, “As I tried to discern the tangled history of my own coming to Christian faith, my whole life has been haunted by the reality of Jesus. I find that despite all the scholarship that has taken place from my seminary days to this moment, there is no abatement in the power of the haunting allure of the figure of Jesus.” I have kept that paragraph in my files for many years, because I was privileged to know him and be taught by him—and what he said about Jesus is true for me as well.

Sittler went on in that speech to tell a story about Krister Stendahl, a world-renowned New Testament scholar, with whom he was appearing at a theological symposium in Iowa. After the presentations, which were intellectually ambitious, during the question-and-answer period, a man got up and said, “Professor Stendahl, how did you get hooked on this stuff?” “We all leaned forward,” Sittler remembered, “and expected from Stendahl a long-haired description of the historical, conceptual, philosophical path by which many of us came, and it was a great moment when Stendahl said, ‘My family and I were not church people at all and the only way I could rebel against the mores of my family was to go to church, and when I got to church within six months I fell in love with Jesus’” (*Trinity Seminary Revue*, Fall 1982).

There is a widespread phenomenon, nearly universal, of admiration for Jesus but antipathy toward the Christian religion and the Christian church. Martin Marty says, “There is a great company of nonbelievers, secular

humanists, and atheists, who admire Jesus. . . . Their patriarch is Thomas Jefferson," who didn't believe Jesus was divine but greatly admired him and even published the book *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* ("Inaugural Jesus," *Sightings,* January 2009). Greg Garrett finds the same thing in his Baylor students who are interested in Jesus but repelled by what they see of Christianity and the church in the media. Marcus Borg reports the same phenomenon among his students at Oregon State who think Christians are narrow, fundamentalist, self-righteous, and judgmental. I walked into the office of John Vest, our youth pastor, and saw lying prominently on his desk a book with the provocative title *They Like Jesus but Not the Church.*

Harvard's Robert Putnam and David Campbell, who teaches at Notre Dame, report in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us,* based on a Pew Public Religion Poll, that one of the major reasons people are leaving the church is that the most visible Christianity is consistently described as homophobic, anti-science, prejudiced, and mean-spirited.

Right on schedule, the *New York Times* last week reported that an effort to prevent bullying of homosexual students in a suburban Minneapolis school system is being opposed by the Minnesota Family Council, identified in the paper as a Christian group. That makes me cringe when I read that—and I read it a lot: public Christianity portrayed as mean, narrow, self-righteous, judgmental, opposed to efforts to prohibit bullying when the objects of bullying are gay and lesbian young people. Jesus would be embarrassed by that.

In the middle of the story of his ministry—a three-year period of time that begins when he is thirty years old, in his hometown of Nazareth, and continues through the villages and towns of Galilee, where he teaches in synagogues and on hillsides and from fishing boats, heals the sick, and goes around challenging religious and social convention by welcoming children and women, associating with people who are called unclean, untouchable, outcasts, until he comes finally to the capital city, Jerusalem, where in five days he is arrested, put on trial, and executed by the occupying Romans as a disturber of the peace; two days after that, his friends start to say that they have seen him, eaten with him, talked to him, and that he is alive, risen from the dead and has appointed them to live as he told them to live, in love and justice and compassion and forgiveness and to tell his story to everyone —in the middle of the story there is a pivotal, critical incident.

He and his friends are walking from one village to another along a dirt road, and pretty much out of the blue, he says, “By the way, what are people saying about me? Who do people think I am?” “Funny you should ask,” they say. “We’ve talked to some people who think you are John the Baptist,” his cousin, with whom he was often identified. “Other people think you are one of the old prophets who has returned. Elijah, even.” “What do you think?” he asks. “Who do you say I am?” What a moment that must have been. I’ve always imagined them stopping walking at that point, standing in a kind of semicircle in silence, thinking, maybe looking off into the distance at the sun shining onto a field of ripe grain or a shepherd and his flock of sheep on a hillside. I think there was a long stillness before Peter said—maybe tentatively, although Peter was not a tentative man, but this was the most important question he had ever been asked—slowly, softly, “You are the Messiah, the promised one, the one we have been waiting for, for centuries—our parents, their parents, all the way back. You are the one we’ve been waiting for, the Son of the living God.”

That is the heart of the story of Jesus. It has always intrigued me; I chose that passage to write my senior paper on in Divinity School. I studied the passage as I have never studied anything before or since. I could read it in Greek. I knew what every authority in history had said about it. I explored it from the perspective of culture, politics, economics, and history. I got a good grade on the paper, graduated, and when I was invited to preach in my home church, on the first Sunday after graduation, I decided to use that forty-page paper, bristling with footnotes, as the basis for my sermon. I’ve told this story before—twice, in fact—and I promise this will be the last time, but it is a good one and is important to me. My father was very excited about my appearance in the pulpit of our church. I know now that he was probably as nervous as I was, hoping I didn’t say anything embarrassing. My grandparents came; aunts and uncles and cousins were there. Some of my high school friends showed up, still not believing that I was actually going to be a minister. Our Baptist neighbors did the unthinkable: missed their own church to hear me preach. My little brother, who is here this morning, was there. So were former junior high and senior high school teachers, a coach, Sunday School teachers, and, believe it or not, a major league baseball player, Bob Ramazotti, who played for the Brooklyn Dodgers and Chicago Cubs. I thought that was the coolest thing ever: a major league ballplayer sitting in a church pew a few rows in front of us. My brother reminded me that Ramazotti even taught Sunday school. Dad was

threatening to stand outside the church and sell peanuts and popcorn and autographed church bulletins.

So I did it amidst great nervousness and concern: laid on the congregation my scholarly insights, quoting extensively from antiquity and modern theological scholarship, using lots of big words, like *existential*, and *hermeneutic* and *epistemological*. Somehow we all survived the morning. The people of the congregation were gracious, said all the right things. Magdalene Bair, a junior high teacher with whom I had some unpleasantries and who seemed to have a permanent scowl on her face shook my hand and said, “You still talk too fast and too much” and gave me a little pat.

Afterward there was a brunch at home, and when all the guests left, my father and I were sitting in the living room talking about the morning. And he said something that has stayed with me over the years, perhaps the best insight about this text. He said, “You told us what everybody in history thinks. The next time you preach a sermon like that, leave a little time at the end for what you think.” That is the issue. “What do you think? Who do you say that I am?”

After thinking about this incident on and off for four decades, I have concluded that it is a mistake to stop with Peter’s confession. I now understand that this dramatic incident is the first part of a larger narrative that ought not be chopped up. Who Jesus is is the first part. But it doesn’t stop there. There is an internal momentum. Jesus keeps talking to them. I think they are still standing around in the middle of the road as he says something like, “If what Peter just said about me is true, there will be difficult times ahead: trouble, conflict, suffering.” Then comes the second part of the incident: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”

You see, if the incident ends with Peter’s confession—“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”—then you might conclude that to be a Christian is to be able to say what Peter said. To be a Christian means to be able to understand ideas about Jesus: to have your personal theology and Christology all neatly nailed down. And that is what has happened over the centuries to Christianity. It has come to mean believing certain ideas about Jesus to be true, that he is the only begotten Son of God, that he was born of

a virgin, that he is the eternal Christ, the eternal word of the Father. The Christian intellectual project is magnificent. It, in many ways, defines Western civilization. But one of the results is that Christianity has come to mean a set of ideas or propositions.

Hans Küng, Roman Catholic scholar and one of the most influential Christian thinkers of our generation, wrote about how the church has invested itself totally in establishing and maintaining theological orthodoxy, holding right beliefs and rooting out wrong beliefs, heresy. So important was that project that the church became convinced that it was all right to torture and burn people at the stake for espousing wrong ideas and thinking and expressing heretical thoughts.

In his major work, *Christianity and the World Religions,* he writes, "Jesus never questioned anyone about the true faith, nor asked anyone to profess his or her orthodoxy. He expects no theoretical reflection, but an urgent practical decision."

For saying things like that, Professor Küng has been declared persona non grata by his church and not allowed to teach as a "Catholic theologian."

So can you be a Christian if you don't know exactly what you believe? Is it alright to join the church if you don't have your personal theology all worked out? Of course. There are people in every new member class who ask that question, people in every religious congregation who are uncertain about some of the finer points of Christian theology.

Jesus himself, I believe, accepts that, invites it. He did not say that day long ago, "Believe these five things about me to be true." He did say, "If you would be my disciple, if you would be a Christian, follow me. Listen to me. Do what I do. Pick up a cross. Pick up a burden. Pick up a challenge, a mission, a project that needs doing—and follow along. Open your heart and give it away—your passion, your time, your resources, your love—and you will be fully and totally alive."

From the earliest days, people began to see God when they looked at Jesus. As they watched what Jesus did and listened to what he said, they slowly began to understand that God was like Jesus: that God was not a remote, judgmental, frightening deity, but kind, loving, accepting, gracious, forgiving. It was actually one of their best ideas, from deep in their history.

The psalmist wrote about a God of steadfast love, good to all, with compassion for all. In the man Jesus, the world caught a glimpse of the reality of God: a vulnerable, forgiving, gracious, loving God.

To be a Christian is to entertain the notion that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.” St. Paul wrote two decades later that God is like Jesus and we are to get up from where we are sitting and do something; take the first step and follow where he leads.

That is the way it was for them. Right up to the end they weren’t exactly sure what they believed about him, but they followed him to his cross and beyond for the rest of their lives.

Understanding comes not before the decision to follow, but after. Your personal theology is not merely an intellectual journey, although that is certainly part of it, a part I’ve enjoyed and been compelled by all my life, but understanding comes in the midst of following: serving, loving, sacrificing, helping, reaching out and touching—serving food to a homeless person, laying cement blocks for Habitat for Humanity, tutoring a child, loving and giving your life for those God has given you to love and care for and be responsible for. It can even happen in a community meeting, a church meeting.

Leave some time at the end for what you think, Dad said.

Here is what I think:

> Jesus was and is a true revolutionary. What could be more radical than love for enemies rather than their annihilation? What could be more courageous than forgiveness rather than retaliation? What could be stronger and more helpful and life-giving than the blessedness of the peacemakers? (See Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian,* p.191.)
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> He is as compelling to me as ever: more so, in fact, as I have experienced and witnessed how powerfully transforming he is.
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> His inclusive love, his welcome to the outcasts, breaking bread with anyone who would sit with him, touching the untouchables, challenges my own sometimes cautiously fastidious religion.

> His radical love challenges my conventionalism. His siding with the oppressed judges my timidity. His humility, his willingness to suffer, to lay down his life every day, challenges my comfortable complacency.
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> His radical reversal—if you want to find your life, lose it—continues to challenge and lift my spirit.
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> And his promise "I will be with you until the end of the age" is a light in the darkness.

"Who do you say that I am?" One of my favorite reflections on the question, the truth of which I continue to experience, was written more than a century ago by Albert Schweitzer, who, in addition to everything else he did—as organist, musician, physician, organizer of a mission hospital in Africa—also along the way became a recognized New Testament scholar. He wrote a major scholarly book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. The last words of that book I have found to be true. He left the scholarly pursuit, the historical and textual analysis, behind and did what Dad told me to do, left space at the end for what he believed:

> He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me" and he sets before us the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings they pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is.

Amen.